



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

## THE CHILD JESUS IN PAINTING.

---

By WILLIAM C. WILKINSON,  
The University of Chicago.

---

*Pictures of Jesus are wholly imaginary.—Artists attempt to represent the ideal Christ.—Preëminence of Raphael in this field.—The Sistine Madonna.—Perugino's painting of the Christ-child.—Fra Angelico's conception.—The infant Jesus by Leonardo da Vinci.—Hoffman's picture of the boy Jesus at twelve.—Hunt's Finding of Jesus in the Temple.—Müller's representation of Joseph and Jesus.—Comparison of the earlier and the later pictures of the child Jesus.—Have these pictures benefited true religion?*

It has been said lamentingly by lovers of art that the influence of Christianity, or rather of Roman Catholicism, has tended to the injury of painting by replacing the subjects and ideals that ancient classic paganism presented with subjects and ideals less fit and less lovely than those. The gods and goddesses of Greek mythology, the forms and faces of men and women exultant in strength or radiant in the bloom of youth and beauty, have given way, it is complained, to emaciated saints and lacerated martyrs, as springs of inspiration to the painter's brush and to the sculptor's chisel. Nobody that has made the tour of the great art galleries of Europe will deny that there is a measure of truth in this criticism. But, on the other hand, no such person can fail to feel that there has been, to say the least, a large compensation from the same source for the loss and damage that the cause of art has thus suffered. Christian history has supplied to artists some motives and subjects for their use surpassing in true value any that Greek or Roman paganism at its best had to offer. Among these, supreme in their power of appeal to the universal human heart, are the mother Mary and her son. Childhood may be said to have had hardly any place in the consideration of art—infancy, perhaps, to have had no place at all—until Christianity supplied it in the

story of the divine incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth. The purpose of the present paper is to set before readers, in reproductive



RAPHAEL.—THE SISTINE MADONNA

See page 461

illustration, accompanied by brief elucidating comment, a few select specimens of what the art of painting has done in the way of imagining and embodying ideals of the child Jesus.

In the first place it needs to be said, and to be said strongly, that there exists, and can exist, no representation of the person

of Jesus Christ, the infant, the youth, or the man, that is not purely and absolutely the product of imagination, and of imagination working without historic hint of any sort whatsoever to guide or to check it. We not only do not know how Jesus looked, but we do not know whether he was fair to see or the reverse; or whether, indeed, he may not have been of a quite undistinguished and indifferent personal appearance. There are texts of Scripture that favor each one of these different conceptions. In fact, they have each one of them at different times or in different places been entertained. Happily for art, happily for humanity, the conception that makes Jesus fair among the children of men has prevailed; and artists have vied with each other in seeking to glorify the Son of Man, sometimes, indeed, with pathetic, but always with superhuman, personal charm. This has been especially true of Jesus as infant and as child.

The problem presented to the artist undertaking to treat this theme, was one peculiarly, indeed uniquely, interesting. It stimulated and inspired alike by its nobleness and by its difficulty. It appealed to everything pure and high and ardently aspiring in the soul of the artist. The problem, in short, was nothing less than the reconciling, in a face that should be felt to be natural, of true infantile simplicity, innocence, unconsciousness, gaiety even, with a suggestion of depth, of thoughtfulness, of prescience, of pathos, rather divine than human. In the attempting of such a problem, not only genius, skill, and study would be brought into play, but equally the sentiment of worship, if that sentiment existed in the artist's soul. That sentiment certainly did sometimes exist, and a proper effect was then registered in the picture produced. In many other cases the poetic imagination of the artist had to do what it could to perform the part of the missing authentic sentiment of worship, and then the contrasted appropriate result would appear on the canvas. For Ruskin is probably right in maintaining that art is the truest language ever spoken to reflect the intimate spirit of the man that speaks it. As to his own real interior self, the artist cannot dissemble in his work. Whatever else he leaves out, he perforce puts himself into his picture.

One artist, of all the Christian ages down to the actual moment, enjoys an undisputed preëminence, and, thanks to a gracious personality in him commanding his genius, a quite unenvied preëminence, among the painters that have treated the subject of the child Jesus. This could be no other than Raphael. Some fifty different pictures from his hand, or, if not wholly from his hand, at least in great part from his creative imagination, survive to attest the truly amazing fecundity of this great artist's genius displayed in depicting the mother Mary and her infant son. Of these pictures some, it is likely, were the fruit of collaboration with their master on the part of Raphael's pupils. Grace, celestial grace, is the circumfluous ether in which all these pictures seem, to the eye of the beholder, to float as if upborne by their own inherent buoyancy. Everybody knows the so-called Sistine Madonna (see page 459). That is, indeed, probably the best-known picture in the world. It makes the fame of the Dresden gallery, where it hangs with every advantage of artistic display to enhance the luminous, almost apocalyptic, effect it instantaneously produces on the sympathetic spectator. The picture is so familiar in reproductions that we might almost dispense with exhibiting it here; but that very familiarity is proof of its being too dear to the popular heart to be passed by in a paper like this.

The just interpretation of this familiar picture requires some little attention to details. The proportion of parts is so perfect that the central figures inevitably attract at first, as they ought to do, the almost exclusive notice of the observer. The Madonna is treated as Queen of Heaven. This is, of course, a distinctly Roman Catholic element in the artist's conception, which the Protestant student, intent on æsthetic appreciation, can afford to overlook. The thought of it is, however, necessary in order to the understanding of the extraordinary pose and situation of the mother. She appears supported on a radiant cloud; or, indeed, rather as needing no support, but self-buoyant like the cloud itself. About her is a nimbus of angels beholding and wondering. These forms and faces are almost lost to view, effaced in the cloud of which they seem to form a part. On either side are

the kneeling figures of Pope Sixtus and Saint Barbara. The anachronisms thus involved are obvious, but they need not disturb our enjoyment. They are, considered in themselves alone, without reference to historic propriety, very noble adjuncts to the picture, helping to balance it and to set off, by contrast of pose and expression, the transcendent majesty intended by the artist to be attributed to the mother and the son. That the mother appears comparatively too commanding a figure, is due to the overweening homage paid to her in the Roman Catholic cult. It would be unreasonable to expect Raphael to transcend his age and environment sufficiently to avoid this error. The rapt expression of the Madonna's face is a wonderfully composite expression, made up of a certain timid wonder at her own exaltation—a sentiment which is overcome by an exquisite humility of acquiescence in her heavenly calling—maiden modesty reconciled with angelic motherhood, and radiant over all, and, as it were, translucent through all, a purity for which there is no fit parallel to express it by comparison. When you can withdraw your eye from studying and admiring the expression of the face, you may spend a long leisure in dwelling with satisfaction and delight on the incomparable dignity and grace of the whole figure, with its flowing folds of vestment, from the simply parted hair down to the unconscious loveliness of the feet.

But it is the infant son in the mother's arms that it really belongs to us here to study. How ineffably fair in infantile beauty, while how miraculously transfigured from human to divine in the noble depth of expression imprinted on the face, or rather shining through it! And then the "starlike sorrows of immortal eyes," with a gaze in them as if betokening "thoughts that wander through eternity"! It is very probably conjectured that the infant angels that rest on the bar at the bottom of the canvas and look up with wonder and worship, were an after-thought of the artist, painted in subsequently to the completing of the rest of the picture. There is a fine fitness of congruity between the two types of infancy, the divine-human and the angelic, thus brought together in mutually illuminating comparison and contrast.

We shall be obliged to limit ourselves here to not more than eight illustrations of our subject. If we should select these on the ground of artistic value merely, or on the ground of this together with the fame of the artist producing them, we should hardly have occasion to go away from Raphael for our purpose. Probably no other artist could offer us a single picture of the child Jesus on the whole superior in interest to any one of six or eight that we could find from Raphael's hand (see p. 422). But, for the sake of variety, we shall, after one delay further with Raphael, go to other artists for the rest of our illustrations. An assemblage has been made of the heads of the infant Jesus, taken from various pieces of Raphael. This we here reproduce. It will be seen that the topmost head is from the picture just shown, which goes generally by the name of the Sistine Madonna. This head is worthy of the *préeminence* which, by the present arrangement, it enjoys. The head next it, seeking to nestle against it, is almost equally familiar, being that belonging to the picture known as the *Madonna della Seggiola* or *della Sedia* [*Madonna of the Chair*]. A little more pure softness of expression, a little less wistful prescience in the eye, a tenderer infantile age, seem to difference this head from that against which it leans as if supporting itself on an elder brother's shoulder. The head directly under the one last noticed is from the *Madonna della Casa Tempi*. This loses more than the other two do by separation from the picture to which it belongs; it suffers, too, in comparison by not showing us so much frank front aspect. The head to the left of this last, having the upward-looking face, is loverlier again. It is taken from *La Belle Jardinière* [*The Beautiful (female) Gardener*], so-called from the surrounding of landscape given the mother in the painting. It is truly wonderful what divine loveliness of expression the genius, the art, and the gracious personality of the painter have combined to impart to the eye shown us in this picture, which, the pose of the head being such, is almost alone depended upon to secure the desired effect. The soft, moulded fullness of the cheek and chin, the lips opening like the opening bud of a flower, contribute something; and then the sweet, affectionate, appealing, upward turn

of the head — altogether it is rather the picture of a very lovely human child than the suggestion of a theanthropic infant such as appears to have been attempted by eminence in the canvas of the Sistine Madonna. The sleeping child in the center of the picture needs no descriptive comment ; but the longer one dwells with the eye upon the pure beatified peace of the face, the more one feels the artist's power in repose. The head to the Sistine's right is from a picture called the Bridgewater Madonna and owned in England. It is perhaps the least interesting member of the group of infant Christs here displayed. The two heads opposite each other on the extreme right and left of the picture are heads of the infant John Baptist. The one on the right will be recognized as that seen in the Madonna della Sedia. The other seems to be that of the La Belle Jardinière, but it is shown reversed. It ought to be added that these identifications though submitted by the present writer with some confidence, are subject to correction.

It will be interesting to run back from Raphael to Perugino, his master, that we may get a hint of the example and culture through which the genius of the more famous pupil was nourished and guided. Art does not, more than Nature, make her progress by leaps ; Raphael owes much to his predecessors. The original of the picture by Perugino which we present hangs in the Pitti Palace in Florence. The canvas has suffered somewhat, and the reproduction of course sympathizes. But it is easy to see that on such a pupil as Raphael such a master as Perugino must have had an influence no less fine in quality than it was great in quantity. The transition is not abrupt from the tranquil sweetness and purity of Perugino's atmosphere and handling to the serene seraphic beauty of Raphael's work. The mother stands in flowing vestment with head declined and eyes downcast toward the babe, whom, with her hands pressed together before her breast, she seems less to love and admire than to worship. The nursemaid holds the child and regards the mother as if to catch from her the sentiment proper for herself ; one is reminded of that saying of the psalm, "As the eyes of a maiden [look] unto the hand of her mistress." Retired half

behind the mother Mary, little John Baptist, quite by himself, clasps his hands in a gesture of adoration well befitting his pen-sive, precocious, prophetic face. Jesus, doubling his fist against his chin in true infantile sort, raises his eyes toward his mother with



PERUGINO — MADONNA AND CHILD

an expression of ruth in them, as if he felt by prescient sympathy the sword that was to pierce through her own soul also, in the future passion of her son. It is a noble treatment, not unworthy to have forerun the greater pupil's handling of the same subject.

Let us recede once more, going back the space of one generation behind Perugino to Fra Angelico, surnamed The Blessed. As the prefix *Fra* [Brother] imports, this painter was a friar. His character and life, if all tradition can be trusted, confirmed as it is by the testimony of the work surviving from his hand, were everything that could tend to fit a man for producing pic-

tures seven times purified in quality. He painted in a spirit of religious devotion. It is related of him that whenever he took up his brush he prepared himself for using it by an exercise of prayer. The result is that an air of sanctity consecrates his

canvases, beyond even the purity that Raphael drew from the depths of his gracious nature and his poetic imagination. The hallowed peace that saint and angel express in Fra Angelico's pictures is like a glimpse of heaven. He was a charming colorist, but of course our present reproductions necessarily lose the effect due to the soft delicious blending of those harmonious hues which, against the golden background characteristic of him, heighten so the charm of his pictures. But there is grace enough in face and form and pose and vesture to leave the lack of color hardly missed, except to those who have grown familiar with the originals. The piece we show bears the name of the

FRA ANGELICO—MADONNA  
DELLA STELLA

Madonna della Stella, a name derived from the star pictured on the forehead of the Mother. The crown unobtrusively suspended over her head suggests the idea of the coronation of the Virgin. Her face might at first seem too miniature-like to express the strength and character we should wish to find in an ideal representation of the mother of our Lord. But it is not strength that we should look for in Fra Angelico's work; it is the beauty of holiness. The divine babe nestles to his mother, a fondling finger pressed to her chin; but the regard of his eyes is outward as if gazing far away and piercing into futurity. One can imagine that the infant Saviour already foresees his cross. It belonged to the maiden-like modesty, the cloistered



chastity, perhaps even the severe moral sense, of Fra Angelico's taste and imagination, that, as will be observed, he clothes his infant Jesus; not depending at all for his effect on exhibition of nude flesh, even in the case of infancy, where nearly if not all



LEONARDO DA VINCI—MADONNA AND CHILD

other artists feel quite released from any necessity to use drapery. The colors employed by Fra Angelico in the present picture (which is part of an altar-piece done in panels) are a softly brilliant blue for the outer robe of the Virgin, with pale yellow for the lining slightly displayed in narrow edges where it chances to turn back, and a sober red for the under dress. The babe is enveloped in a vesture of this latter color. All is set off against a background of gold, according to Fra Angelico's habit, already mentioned, in painting.

Returning to the time of Raphael's master Perugino, we

encounter the stately figure of Leonardo da Vinci, whose fame, like that of Raphael (and that of Michael Angelo still more) is the fame of a various, not to say universal, genius, and not of a painter merely. We are able to present an infant Jesus from his hand that is impressed with a distinction and an elevated character recognizably the artist's own sign manual. The mother and the son have just the likeness to each other that seems fit. It is a grave and noble beauty that moulds and informs the face of Mary, while the son, standing beside her, condescends as from a conscious majesty divine to show his blended infantile human nature by toying with a slender lily stem held in the hand of his mother. The two do not look at one another; but the air of both is as if, without exchange of looks, the sympathy and understanding between them were perfect. There is perhaps a trace of something like what we might be tempted to call precocity in the child's face; but this, if it is really present, is of course to be interpreted as an attempt, not quite absolutely successful, on the artist's part, to produce an effect of divinity in the expression. The fine severity of taste reigning in the picture, the serene dignity of it, are admirable beyond praise. It is an exquisite work of art. But we need in this picture, as in all the others shown, to overlook a disregard, on the painter's part, of certain obvious historic probabilities. For instance, here there is far too much costly elegance of costume, and too much suggestion of drawing-room propriety, to fit the circumstances of a child born, as Jesus was, son to a carpenter and cradled in a manger. But this is only saying in effect that the great Italian masters of the brush were not realists in art. They idealized freely and they were willing to produce their impressions on the observer by some sacrifice of mere raw fidelity in the matter of fact to noble fictions of the imagination.

Let us make an abrupt transition from the classic art of the Renaissance period to the art of our own times. Heinrich Hoffmann is a German painter who has treated Bible themes with much popular acceptance. We give a picture of his representing Jesus no longer a babe, but now a boy of twelve (see p. 451). The subject is the Disputation in the Temple. The light, as it should

do, centers upon the face and figure of the child, standing in the midst of doctors of the law, who listen with various expressions of countenance to the wonderful utterances issuing from those youthful lips; or, more accurately, who regard the boy in silent perplexity caused by something he has just said—for his lips are now closed. The attitudes and the looks of the different personages are very carefully studied, to indicate their imagined different characters and different present dispositions toward what is here unexpectedly confronting them. The somewhat severe face of the man sitting in the foreground to the right, who holds the book on his knees and who perhaps feels responsible for not being unduly moved, expresses, in the firm, almost hard, closure of the lips, determined impenetrability to truth proceeding from such a source as the boy before him. The younger man next him bends toward Jesus with much more benignity, if not even with some openness to impression, betrayed in his half-yearning mien. The venerable figure beyond this one, who stands leaning, like Jacob, upon the top of his staff, has a somewhat crass worldly look of some curiosity, but more incredulity. The man to the right of Jesus grasps his beard and rests his chin in his hand, with an air of sincere, though perplexed, inquiry, betokening some accessibility on his part to divine communication coming even from the mouth of such a child. But these various figures are of course but accessories and foils to the figure of Jesus himself. A suggestion of supernatural light in aureole beams from the head of the boy, whose illumined countenance is self-luminous as well and seems to diffuse light. It has evidently been the effort of the artist to blend in the boy's attitude and expression a beautiful modesty of childhood with a half-unconscious, half-conscious direct vision of truth. There may be suspected in the picture a verging toward manneristic sentimentalism weakening somewhat the impression of nobility and strength which a treatment of this subject ought to produce. But it is a piece of work well adapted to give general satisfaction.

Our next picture is of the Finding of Jesus in the Temple. The painter is an Englishman, Holman Hunt, an artist perhaps

entitled to be considered the head of the so-called Preraphaelite school. The figures here are somewhat numerous, and they are portrayed with all that painstakingly minute fidelity to fact and to nature which is the characteristic of this group of artists.



HOLMAN HUNT—THE FINDING OF JESUS IN THE TEMPLE

But the interest of course belongs to the boy Jesus himself, with his mother and Joseph. The mother has already succeeded in detaching her son from his engagement with the Jewish doctors, and—one of her arms thrown lovingly about him to a rest on his shoulder, while on the other, upraised, is responsively laid a hand of the boy—she is whispering in his attentive ear. The parted lips indicate this action on her part as still in progress. The concern, the affectionate reproach, expressed in her countenance suggests that she is saying: "Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? Behold, thy father and I sought thee sorrowing." The son has not yet made his immortally memorable reply: "How is it that ye sought me? Wist ye not that I must be in my Father's house?"—but the wide-open eyes, looking out with such far speculation into space, indicate sufficiently what the nature of the reply will be. Joseph, with noble reserve,

stands retired behind the mother, adding fit foil of contrast to the two principal figures in front. The son appears to listen loyally to his mother, while yet his expression suggests a sense in him of paramount loyalty and obedience owed to his Father in heaven. Some scrutinizing students of his face may suspect in themselves a feeling that the artist has overstrained the intensity of the look and produced an effect as if the boy were not an example of perfectly normal, wholesome boyhood, but had become precocious through an experience of some sort of suffering. The execution of the picture, it will be observed, is singularly elaborate and finished in every detail. There is nothing of the indistinctness of "impressionism."

We present finally another German picture (see p. 447). It would seem as if perhaps the painter, Karl Müller, had sought, in one instance at least, to do something towards redressing the balance between Mary and Joseph in the representations of art, by substituting for the mother her husband in his treatment. The motive has certainly the interest and the merit of difference and novelty. The father, who bears a face much resembling the conventional face of Christ in art, stands patiently instructing his wonderful boy. Such, at any rate, is the apparent intention of the picture. But the boy seems, in his wise docility, his docile wisdom, to have surprised Joseph into the attitude rather of one instructed than of one instructing. The father has involuntarily placed his open palm against his breast, as if in an awe before the boy like the awe of worship. The boy, who is made almost feminine in the extreme delicacy of his beauty, looks up with revelation, almost more than inquiry, into his father's face. "Hyacinthine locks," like those of Milton's Adam, curl clustering down his neck. On the whole, one needs to see the fine circlet of halo around the head to be sure that this figure is really that of the boy Jesus. Without that, the careless observer might have quite mistaken the meaning of the picture, and, misled by the Christlikeness of Joseph's head, have understood the artist's purpose to be to represent the Saviour instructing an ideal boy. It was no doubt a mistake in judgment and in taste on the artist's part to introduce such a resemblance into his portrait of

Joseph. It might even raise the suspicion of an ulterior purpose in his mind, to suggest an idea repugnant to the just sense of those who accept for literally true the evangelist's story of the birth of Jesus. The leaf and flower that frame the two figures are quite in the somewhat sentimental taste that characterizes the whole treatment.

If the pictures here shown may fairly be taken, and probably they may, as representative of the two types of treatment, the older ideal portraits of Jesus in art will by most be felt to have more depth of tone, not only in respect of technique, but in feeling, than the newer ones; more faith, more sincerity, more of the sentiment of awe and of worship. The spirit of the earlier age was more favorable to such treatment of such a subject.

I have left myself no room to discuss a question very naturally raised by the subject here treated, viz., Has religion been on the whole a gainer from the fictile representations by painters of the face and form of the Madonna and of Jesus? If religion be largely understood to include such interests as culture and humanity, there can be no doubt of the true reply to our question; religion so understood has certainly been a gainer. If, on the other hand, religion be confined to the central idea of obedience to God, there is more chance for divergence of opinion. There is always danger that the aesthetic and the sentimental interest will usurp what belongs properly to the authentic religious interest alone. To dwell in thought on the Christ of the gospels and the epistles, to seek to become ourselves living copies of the divine portrait therein shown, would certainly be better than any amount, or any degree, of joy in appreciation of art, even of art employed in ideal representations of the incarnate Lord. What may seem less like a homiletic lesson, it would probably be also in result a better cultivation of both the taste and the sentiments.